

Critique of Maxine Greene's *Releasing the Imagination*

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Every classroom consists of two fundamental components. There is the curriculum, which is the material that is to be taught, and there is the instruction, which is how that material is taught. While curriculum decisions are often made, at least in part, outside of the classroom, it is generally left to the educator to translate curriculum into instruction. These curriculum decisions can be influenced by countless aspects, but the curricular ideology of the person making the decisions is usually an overriding factor. There are a variety of curricular ideologies that educators draw from and most would not consider themselves to be restricted to only one; rather, teachers tend to blend the aspects of particular ideologies with their own personal beliefs to discover a teaching style that suits them best. Many teachers draw ideological aspects of their teaching styles from educational philosophers whose models and theories help educators design, organize, and maintain successful classrooms. One such philosopher is Maxine Greene and the remainder of this essay will be a critique of her 1995 book, *Releasing the Imagination*. This critique will center on two questions. First, does the text exemplify particular curricular ideologies, and second, does the text provide beneficial mechanisms for considering curriculum and instruction.

Throughout *Releasing the Imagination* there are two main curricular ideologies that Greene consistently suggests. The first, progressivism, is an ideology built around the writings of John Dewey. Progressivists believe in a student-centered curriculum and see students as "...growing organisms whose major developmental task is to come to terms, through adaptation or transformation with the environment in which [they] live" (Eisner, 1994, p. 67). Additionally, progressive educators stress the importance of experience and a curriculum built around engaging problems that students can work together to solve. Finally, for progressivists, the understanding of a student's history and existence outside of school is a necessary component of

a successful classroom, “what a child [has experienced] and how he or she [feels is] directly relevant to the teacher’s professional aims” (Eisner, 1994, p. 71).

The second curricular ideology that Greene draws on is reconceptualism. This ideology is more difficult to define and many educational philosophers fit loosely into this category (Manen, 1978, p. 367). The main aspect of reconceptualist thought is a questioning, particularly in a new and unique manner, of the current educational system. Reconceptualists attempt to catalyze future change by bringing to light shortcomings in modern education. In other words, they strive for a “reconceiving [of] the fundamental concerns, questions, and priorities that give character to the field of curriculum inquiry” (Manen, 1978, p. 366). Additionally, reconceptualists argue that, “What is missing from American schools...is a deep respect for personal purpose, lived experience, for the life of imagination, and for those forms of understanding that resist dissection and measurement” (Eisner, 1994, p. 77). The emphasis that reconceptualists place on the importance of “lived experience” is identical to that of the progressivists, and both see active and engaging experiences as a foundational component of the way classrooms should be run.

The first major example of Greene’s progressive tendencies emerges as she discusses the impact students should have on the world around them. Greene urges educators to “...empower [students] to pursue their freedom and, perhaps, transform to some degree their lived worlds” (Greene, 1995, p. 48). This call to empowerment and to create a difference in the world is a main theme that is echoed in the progressive writings of Dewey, “the child [should act] on the environment... not simply digest it, and in the process, that environment [is] personally transformed” (Eisner, 1994, p. 67). The similarities between Greene’s statement of encouraging students to “transform their lived worlds” and Dewey’s “personally transformed environment”

clearly indicate the progressive roots of Greene's educational philosophy. Throughout *Releasing the Imagination*, Greene consistently advocates for pedagogical ideologies that stress the importance of students playing a participatory role in the environment and communities they are a part of. When students are able to contribute to the world around them and acquire a sense of ownership, they become active learners and begin to realize that what they are learning can actually make improvements in their lives.

Greene also discusses the importance of experience in education, especially in regard to responsibility, a foundational progressive belief, "An important dimension of all education must be the intentional bringing into being of norm-governed situations, situations in which students discover what it is to experience a sense of obligation and responsibility" (Greene, 1995, p. 66). When students are placed into educational situations that provide them with new and engaging experiences, especially those situations where the students, instead of teachers, are responsible for the outcome, they are generally more motivated to participate. Giving students responsibility and showing them they are trusted within established educational contexts is a powerful tool that teachers should always consider when designing and enacting curriculum. Providing students with these kinds of experiences is often difficult to achieve in the traditional classroom, where material is primarily learned through lecture and test-taking. However, in the progressive classroom, where students are involved with hands-on activities and real-world problems, it becomes much easier to develop that sense of responsibility within the students.

In addition to the progressive beliefs emphasized in *Releasing the Imagination*, there are also strong ties to reconceptualism that can be found. First, Greene states that, "An ability to take a fresh look at the taken for granted seems...important; without that ability, most of us, along with our students, would remain submerged in the habitual" (Greene, 1995, p. 100). This

idea of questioning the traditional and taken for granted is dominant for reconceptualists, whose main goal is to bring to light issues that are often overlooked and ignored as they have become part of the educational tradition. By “taking a fresh look at the taken for granted,” students and teachers can make discoveries that lead them to new avenues of thought and understanding. This is why reflection, for students and teachers alike, is a crucial element of any classroom. By allowing time to reflect on assignments, curriculum, instruction, and every other aspect of the classroom, teachers and students can draw on their new experiences to find possibilities that initially went unnoticed. Especially in regards to curriculum, the most efficient way for teachers to determine how effective and beneficial a curriculum is, is to combine personal and student reflection into a cohesive understanding of how the learning process was viewed from all perspectives.

Greene also discusses reconceptualist themes when illustrating how teachers must not only be concerned with the present state of their classroom but also keep an eye to the future, “...our transformative pedagogies must relate both to existing conditions and to something we are trying to bring into being, something that goes beyond a present situation” (Greene, 1995, p. 51). This belief of bringing something new “into being” is a main tenant for reconceptualists, who seek to break from the current trends and traditions of the educational system. By using educational pedagogies to connect the present to the imagined future, teachers can create a more holistic curriculum that takes into account not only where the students are but also what they should be striving towards.

While it may be interesting to define the curricular ideologies that Greene promotes throughout her text, these beliefs serve no practical purpose unless they can be applied to ways of thinking about curriculum and instruction. Fortunately, Greene provides several examples of

how her ideologies pertain to both the curricular and instructional aspects of the classroom. One of the most important components Greene discusses in regard to curriculum is the necessity of incorporating personal experience. When students sit and listen to a lecture on terms and concepts, they can rarely build a personal connection to the material. However, when students are provided the opportunity to actively explore a topic, connections are made more easily between past experiences, the current curriculum, and future possibilities. Therefore, when designing curriculum, be it at the classroom, district, or state level, educators should ensure ample opportunities for student-centered, hands-on activities that allow students to make those personal connections. This can prove a difficult task when working at the district or state level as the contextual elements in every classroom differ. It is challenging to design an exploratory curriculum that will work in all classrooms within a district or even within a school. Therefore, it should generally be left up to individual teachers, or at least a team of teachers within a school, to design these more progressive curriculums and ensure that the unique needs of each particular student body can be met.

In addition to the role experience can play in a beneficial curriculum, Greene also emphasizes the importance of including art and artistic expression. Greene believes that,

At the very least, participatory involvement with the many forms of art can enable us to *see* more in our experience, to *hear* more on normally unheard frequencies, to *become conscious* of what daily routines have obscured, what habit and convention have suppressed (Greene, 1995, p. 123).

When artistic activities are utilized within the curriculum, they can help students think about ideas and traditions in new and exciting ways. This stress on the arts and the power they have is

largely reconceptual in nature and Greene believes that through art students can begin to illuminate possibilities where before there was only habit and consistency. Additionally, Greene later adds that, “the shocks and awareness to which the arts give rise leave us (*should* leave us) less immersed in the everyday and more impelled to wonder and to question” (Greene, 1995, p. 135). For the sciences in particular, there is nothing more important than a student’s ability to “wonder and to question.” Scientists must constantly look at the world around them and ask questions about why things are the way they are. As Greene argues, art can provide an opening for students to begin questioning and wondering, an opening that can be carried over into the sciences and allow for students to become active inquirers into the phenomena of the natural world.

Therefore, when considering curriculum and attempting to design a successful classroom, teachers should attempt to integrate as many student-centered experiences as possible in addition to providing ample opportunities for exposure to the arts. By doing this, teachers can supply students with the tools to become more active participants in the world around them and to view that world from a variety of viewpoints.

While these broad ideas may prove useful in the act of curricular design, Greene also provides multiple instances of practical approaches to instruction that can be implemented in almost any classroom. Greene believes that educators can “...consciously do more to place children in speech and free writing situations in which they can find out what they think and why and what they see and how as they talk about it, write about it, and bring meaning into their worlds” (Greene, 1995, p. 54). By giving students more opportunities to talk and write about their ideas, and by creating more student-centered instead of teacher-centered classrooms, educators can help students make connections and bring more “meaning into their world.” When

students are asked to talk or write about a particular idea, they must first come to grips with that idea within themselves, and that is when true learning takes place. Therefore, by encouraging the acts of speaking and writing, teachers serve as a catalyst, helping to drive along the learning process and guide students to new understandings.

In addition to encouraging students to talk and write about ideas, Greene also discusses the importance of incorporating reading activities into instruction, "...imagination may be released through reading, and when it is, meanings derived from previous experiences often find their way through the gateway of imagination...to interact with present-day experiences" (Greene, 1995, p. 76). In other words, reading can be used to help students bridge the divide between what they have previously learned and what they are currently learning. However, care must be taken when assigning reading activities to students, especially when working with a class of diverse learners. If students are given reading materials that are above their cognitive abilities the only result will be frustration for both the teacher and the student. Therefore, teachers must have, at the very least, a rudimentary idea of what reading level their students are comfortable with.

Of the countless decisions that teachers must make in order to establish and maintain a successful learning environment within their classroom, how to design the curriculum and how to translate that curriculum into instruction are two of the most important. There are many curricular ideologies that teachers base these decisions on, and for the vast majority of educators, no single ideology can fully encompass their views and beliefs. Because of this it is necessary for teachers to draw from many sources in educational philosophy and to explore the possibilities of how a classroom can be run. In *Releasing the Imagination* Maxine Greene emphasizes two of these ideologies, progressivism and reconceptualism. Using the tools and advice provided by

Greene, teachers can begin to construct classrooms that are more student-centered and rely on inquiry and exploration over lectures and worksheets. Using Greene's progressive ideas, teachers can incorporate personal experiences and provide students with the opportunity to act on their environment and not just be a part of it. Additionally, using Greene's reconceptualist ideas, teachers can accentuate the role of artistic expression within the curriculum and help students begin to explore outside of their habits and traditions, to see old ideas in new lights. By designing a classroom using Greene's philosophies as a guide, educators can create an environment that will help students grow into active learners and participatory citizens, citizens that will value the role of education and see it as a vehicle for expanding human knowledge and creativity, not just a system for conveying isolated and irrelevant facts to students who would rather be elsewhere.

Works Cited

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